



D.C.: The lawyer capital of the world

By: **Brian Hughes** | 10/30/11

City houses one lawyer per 12 residents, highest in nation

One is probably sitting near you when you Metro into work. And eating lunch at the table next to you. And one, if not many, likely lives on your block on Capitol Hill or Georgetown.

Sure, D.C. is the mecca for politicians. But it's a more clandestine army of professionals that defines the District -- lawyers.

An astounding one in 12 District residents -- by far the highest rate nationwide -- is a lawyer, according to American Bar Association and census figures. Put another way: The nation's capital accounts for just one-fifth of 1 percent of the U.S. population but one in every 25 of its lawyers.

Lawyers -- the butt of so many jokes -- will hardly go down in the annals of history as the most respected of occupations.

Depending on whom you ask, this pack of high-end professionals is either a boon for a city that has largely weathered economic turmoil or the root cause of a breeding ground for litigation, or both.

"I'd think a very small percentage of them are chasing ambulances," said Darren McKinney, of the American Tort Reform Association. "But ask any small business owner here about their fears of the 'slip and fall.' It's in no small part because of the density of lawyers and knee-jerk reaction to think lawsuit."

Such a scene played out last week at a hole-in-the-wall pizzeria in Northwest, where a "Careful Wet Floor" sign was displayed on perfectly dry ground.

"It's D.C., brother," said the restaurant owner, who asked to remain anonymous so as not to attract "walking lawsuits." "I've seen phantom falls, pizza burns -- it runs the gamut."

Attorneys around town offer expertise in areas as minute as pet law or food poisoning -- in addition to the array of public policy attorneys padding the ranks of the legal professional.

Coupled with the cocoon of a massive federal work force, an abundance of litigators has catapulted the Washington region to the wealthiest in the nation, where the typical household banks nearly \$85,000 a year.

According to a recent survey by the National Association for Law Placement, the median salary for an associate lawyer in the Washington region with between one and eight years of experience was \$186,250, eclipsing the national median by \$63,000 a year.

As such, some in the legal profession say the fierce competition here benefits the community as a whole.

"You can assume that almost anybody you meet here is a lawyer," quipped Michelle Thomas, a Washington divorce lawyer. "This is a very litigious place, but it forces you to outperform your colleagues. The clients are better served."

And D.C. officials certainly welcome their money in a city that has routinely relied on steeper taxes and consumer fees to plug chronic budget shortfalls.

In New York state, by comparison, one out of every 124 residents is a lawyer and one in every 150 Massachusetts residents are lawyers, the next highest concentrations of lawyers compared with D.C., respectively. One in every 259 Maryland residents and one of every 354 Virginians are lawyers.

The push for D.C. lawyers has grown even higher in recent years, according to some analysts.

"So many new regulations have come out of Washington lately that the demand for lawyers is growing, even if it doesn't employ anybody else very effectively," said Walter Olson, a senior fellow for the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank.

He added: "D.C. is already known for having a contentious and argumentative culture; having zillions of lawyers can't help with that."

Yet, with an income schism that rivals any other metropolitan area in the country -- reflected by a more than 11 percent unemployment rate in D.C. -- some are calling for a more extensive stable of lawyers.

"It sounds like a lot of lawyers, but it's not nearly enough," said Matthew Fraidin, a law professor at the University of the District of Columbia. "There are just an immense number of people who go unrepresented every year. The need for legal service attorneys has increased and the funding for them has decreased.